"I THIRST"
JOHN 19:28-29
APRIL 12, 1974
COMMUNITY GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE

"I thirst." It ends as it begins: with a simple and eloquent statement of his radical humanity. He was born. He did not descend from heaven, he was not an insertion from outside history. He was born in history. Sometimes we miss that in the midst of all the lovely traditions which accompany our celebration of Christmas: shepherds, Wise men, the star, cattle lowing. The scriptural intent, however, is to say that he began his life in the same manner as every man and every woman - in the common miracle called human birth. The humanity and commoness of it all gets lost somewhere in the traditions. For the accounts are clear that it did not happen in a sterile palace nursery, but in the dark, damp, cold and filth of a cow barn. A situation that was altogether humble and altogether human.

As it begins - so it ends: with an eloquently simple statement of human need: "I thirst .

Why must we allegorize that? Why are we so embarrased by the fact that our Lord needed a drink? Why do we spend time looking for symbolic significance in words that are really quite self-explanatory? A classic sermon on this text suggests that Jesus thirsted for God - for salvation - for the Souls of Men. A perfect three point sermon - built on our reluctance to deal with the fact that what he thirsted for was moisture - water - wine - vinegar. He didn't care what. He was dying and thirsty!

We allegorize too much. We take his clear, stabling demands and soften them, flatten them out so they won't disturb our values, our morality, our life style. "Love your enemies - if a man asks for your coat, give him your cloak as well, go a second mile, turn the other cheek, forgive - seventy times seven; blessed are the peace makers". God knows we've taken all of that and run it through the mill of American religion until it comes out sounding suspiciously like a service club creed or a pious scout law. Let's not do that today. Let's allow "I thirst" to stand as a statement of fact

that was so intense that he confessed it to the very men who had driven the nails into his hands and feet.

John alone includes the words in his Gospel. And it has been suggested that he did it because, writing several decades later than the Synoptics, he was confronting an early and popular heresy called "Docetism". The Docetists held that the Christ inhabited the body of Jesus of Nazareth between his baptism and crucifixion. An early picture shows the heavenly Christ observing the crucifixion of the man Jesus from a distance. And so, the author of the Fourth Gospel began a struggle to maintain the integrity of Jesus Christ. Instead of long, philosophic argument he used precise statements - such as "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" - and "I thirst". The intent was to say that Jesus Christ was not God disguising himself as a man: that his humanity was not just a cloak he could discard when it was convenient. But that for our sakes God became a man - that he took on himself all that it means to be a man: pain, ecstacy, sorrow, joy, suffering, laughing dying.

The theological debate began 2,000 years ago, and although we are not given much to theological debate, it seems to me that we are always just two steps away from denying the total humanity of our Lord.

Consider traditional Sunday School art. The Jesus portrayed is etheral, always in spotless robes, sometimes efferinate. One writer observes that the Christ of a lot of churchmen is preoccupied with little lambs and altogether velvety. Swinburne wrote a romantic poem once that called him the "Pale Galilean" - none of which helps us come to grips with the essence of our faith: namely that Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, was fully one of us.

Bishop John A. T. Robinson in a recent lecture suggested that most of the popular images of Christ are destructive of the reality they intend to convey, and urged the contemporary church to return to its basic truth - its basic miracle - that God dwelt among us in a life that was fully human.

"I thirst". He said it, and he meant it.

It points to his total humanity. It points to the terrible vulnerability

of God when he chose to reveal his love in this manner.

W. H. Auden has a passage in his Christmas Oratorio in which Herod the Great is speaking about the birth of Jesus:

"Oh dear, why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible? Why can't they see that the notion of a finite God is absurd? Because it is. And suppose, for the sake of argument, that it is true. Would it make life any better?.....for me personally it would mean that God had given me the power to destroy himself. I refuse to be taken in. He could not play such a horrible practical joke."

That's the significance of 'I thirst'. God, in Jesus Christ became man for us, and not himself at our disposal.

What does it mean? It means that God was not playing a game in Jesus Christ. Chad Walsh puts it in these words: "Christ was God fully entering into the human condition and paying the price of that condition. God was not like some wealthy visitor from the right side of the tracks who schedules a brief tour through the slums to distribute Thanksgiving baskets. He made his home in the slums and endured everything."

The radical implications of that, I think, frequently go right by us. God has supremely dignified human life by living it. He has sanctified the human family by having his son grow up in one. He has lived our life. When we are happy and full of exquisite joy, God shares that - because our ~~XXX~~ Lord experienced it. When we are lonely - God knows what it's like. When we are tired, depressed, angry, frightened - God knows what it feels like. When life tumbles in around us, when a loved one dies, when tragedy strikes - and we find ourselves asking "Why? - Why me? Why did you do this to me?" - God understands. Because Jesus Christ - out of his radical humanity - asked the same question.

When he said, 'I thirst', he was making common cause with every person who ever lived. Every feeling you have had -your Lord has had. I'm grateful for that. I'm thankful for one who knows me - and knows what it's like to be me - that intimately.

Even in death. All our brave protestations to the contrary, nothing scares us as much as death. No subject is so threatening as the subject of our death. And yet, our Lord has been there before us. Even in the valley of the shadow - he has gone ahead.

William Stringfellow had said it eloquently:

"He descended into Hell.

That is very cheerful news.

There is nothing less than Hell unknown to him. There is nothing that I have known this side of Hell that is unfamiliar to Him. There is nothing known to me which I am want to call hell which he has not already known.

Christ means, after all, simply that God is radically intimate with human history and experience in all its grandeur and diversity and personality. Christ has already lived my life. Christ has already died my death. Christ is risen from death for me. And for any man at all."

"I thirst." He said it and he meant it. Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said that "Christianity is the most materialistic of religions. It was real physical thirst that he experienced. There is something about us that wants to spiritualize our faith: to revert to the old Greek idea that reality can be divided into two categories - physical and spiritual: that religion has to do with the spiritual, and that the goal of religion is to deny the phyiscal altogether. The incarnation - God in the life of the man Jesus - however, insists that there can be no such division. Creation is good. Life is good. Human need - human functions are good. Thirst is good - even when you're dying. Our faith has to do, after all, with a life lived in the world: and it is expressed most honestly in rather worldly terms - such as water, bread, wine, blood, body.

Harring said most of what I wanted to say. I will confess that I am sometimes uncorfortable with this exercise - this torrent of words from the pulpit to observe the death of our Lord. And I was doubly uncomfortable about the prospect of preaching on the one word from the cross about which the

least needs to be said. And as I thought about what I would say I asked myself "What would Jesus Christ wasnt to be said about his dying.words - "I thirst." When I asked that question I could not get away from Matthew 25 - words which he said to his disciples prior to the last supper: words which I asked Gene Bryant to read.

'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?

In John Arthur Gossip's commentary on the words from the cross, "I thirst", he wonders who heard them, and who was moved enough by them to bring him a drink. Gossip speculates that it was a young Roman soldier, used to seeing men die, but nevertheless still able to feel the desparate need - the thirst of a man being crucified. He goes on to record his envy: how good to have been there: how good to have been the one to bring our Lord a drink: how good to be able to show our love and compassion and kindness to Jesus himself as he died.

We don't have to envy that young soldier or whoever it was. Because he has told us how to bring a drink to his thirst - his need. 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

The face of every hungry child in the world bears the face of our Lord. The face of every lonely old man, every depressed woman, every hungry mother, every frightened, anxious man - reflects the face of Jesus Christ.

We minister to him = we bring cool water to the parched lips of our dying Lord - when we love and help someone who needs to be loved and helped.

That's how I think he would have us observe this day.....

In gratitude for this life lived as one of us

In the peace that comes from knowing that he has died our death

And in love - and compassion - and kindness for all, "the least of these my brethren" AMEN

ETERNAL GOD, we give thanks for the life of Jesus Christ. We are grateful for his death. And we ask your spirit to help us become the kind of men and women he wants us to be. AMEN